

Washington, DC – This week, Congressman Harry Teague and a local health care administrator participated in a U.S. House Veterans Affairs Committee roundtable discussion about the needs of New Mexico's rural veterans. Congressman Harry Teague invited Charlie Alfero, CEO of Hidalgo Medical Services to participate in the "Meeting the Unique Health Care Needs of Rural Veterans" roundtable. Hidalgo Medical Services provides primary medical, dental, mental health, family support and economic development services in Hidalgo and Grant counties.

In his remarks, Mr. Alfero spoke about how rural veterans' healthcare is affected by the inability of veterans to access local healthcare services. "In the case of health care services for our veterans, separate is rarely if ever equal. In the absence of an all-inclusive system of health care, benefits are fleeting, sporadic and limited by laws and/or regulations designed to adjust access based on categorical budget limitations," said Mr. Alfero. "Currently, Veterans in our own Hidalgo County must travel more than 300 miles to Albuquerque for services. That is roughly the distance from Washington, DC to Hartford, CT. The VA will pay for travel to Albuquerque but not to Silver City which is only 50 miles away. There are better ways of serving American heroes. There is the concept of choice which is established by expanding access through coverage rather than simply fixed location services."

Nationally, there are about 8 million veterans enrolled in the VA health care system, of which about 3 million or 40% are from rural areas. For the 3 million rural veterans, access to a doctor or health care worker who can provide treatment often means hours of travel.

“Providing the best possible healthcare to our veterans is part of the deal that we made with them. These men and women fought for our country, and we are obligated to provide them the support and services they need,” said Congressman Harry Teague, a member of the House Veterans Affairs Committee. “Unfortunately, that’s easier said than done. Veterans in rural America are often underserved and face challenges that include traveling to just see a doctor and the nightmare of navigating the VA system.”

During the roundtable members of the House Veterans Affairs committee heard from participants on a range of topics including: expanding access for mental health care for the Guard and Reserve, identifying the unique needs of women veterans in rural areas, how to leverage existing health infrastructure for rural veterans, tele-medicine and tele-health, and the potential for mobile health care for rural veterans.